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WOMAN'S ASSUMPTION OF SEX SUPERIORITY

BY ANNIE NATHAN MEYER.

ONE of the most charming of the women orators in the late municipal campaign in New York, in a burst of eloquence for which she was applauded, pointed to the lady who stood as the emblem of the Fusion party, and to the tiger of Tammany, and asked if it were possible to hesitate in the choice: "The lady or the tiger confronts you. Which shall it be?" Fortunately, the audience was with the speaker. Questions are admittedly dangerous political weapons. The picture of the voter trembling before the gates was cleverly drawn; yet it might have been awkward had one ventured to suggest that it was not at all certain before which gate one would more violently tremble. It is not difficult to imagine circumstances in which one might pray for the tiger. My own experience is somewhat limited—on the side of the tiger. But I fancy an angry tiger kills quickly.

I am quite sure that, in the political arena, I should dread the advent of women as voters and office-holders a little more than that of the tiger. Of course, to the speaker, Woman typified and summed up all that was honorable, pure, noble, uplifting. To her, even the fact that the emblematic "lady" referred to was really a goddess was in no way disconcerting. It was assumed by many campaigners that the interest taken in the campaign by the women was in itself a conclusive arraignment of Tammany, was in itself a proof that the Fusion party stood for honest government. Of course, such an assumption when it is made by a man is not to be seriously challenged; but when it is made by a large proportion (still, I am persuaded, happily, by a minority) of women, then it becomes worth while to examine woman's claim to moral superiority, to examine it soberly and seriously.

The exercise by woman of the power to vote has been held up

by these women again and again as a panacea for the chief evils, if not all the evils, that now threaten to undermine the moral life of America. As even these women must be aware that in voting the majority prevails, this is clearly an assumption that the majority of women may be counted upon as a force that would make for political righteousness. It is strangely difficult to keep this inference before the public. The popular method of argument is: "Mrs. Thus-and-So is a splendid woman; would she not give us a more intelligent vote than the ignorant hod-carrier?" The fact that the vote of Mrs. Thus-and-So will be pitted against that of Mrs. Hod-carrier, never seems to be considered. It must be remembered that the suffrage—at least in America—is almost certain to be refused to all women, or given to all women; that a vote to one woman will be a vote to all women, vicious and virtuous, ignorant and educated, lowest and highest.

Let me say right here, as emphatically as possible, that while I challenge the assumption that women as a sex could contribute a regenerative force to the body politic, yet I do not deny the fact that there are many fine, true women who could be relied upon to cast their votes every time for the right. That I further think that most of these women do not wish the suffrage, that they have a clearer idea of their sex as a whole and a profounder appreciation of their real duties, does not concern us at present. The question, shorn of all disingenuousness, of all sentimentality, is just this: What could the sex bring to the service of the state to offset the degeneration of public life, to offset the indifference, the sloth, the moral cowardice, the greed, the dishonesty that are seriously menacing the moral life of our Republic?

When a man is chosen by his party as a candidate for office, his career is scrutinized, the question is asked, What has he done in his private career that implies a promise of success in a public career? Similarly, when women offer themselves for political duty (and in no spirit of humility, but with smug self-satisfaction and assumption of superior virtue), is it not just to scrutinize their past, to ask, What special character, what special force, what special talent have they shown in fulfilling their apportioned duties in the past? Is there anything to warrant a faith that they would discharge this new duty faithfully and ably? It is idle for women to say that it is not fair to scrutinize their past, because it was not a past of their own seeking; to claim that in-

competency in domestic life bears no relation to incompetency in political life, that the shirking of disagreeable duties would not mean the shirking of (supposedly) agreeable ones. Idle, and futile, I say, because we are probing deeper than that! We do not wish to know if their heads are equal to the problems of government; it does not concern us if they are not fitted for domestic duties—if they dislike them; it is not brains, nor aptitudes, nor even ability that are vital, it is character. Character is the one force needed in American life to-day. And character may be more safely judged from the way in which we perform disagreeable duties than from the way in which we perform agreeable ones. The question is not so much whether certain tasks allotted to women in the past have been well or ill performed; but it is—it doubly, trebly, is: Having been confronted with these tasks, in what manner have they approached them? Have they shirked them, or have they done their best? Have they done the work they found to be done, willingly, conscientiously, patiently, uncomplainingly? Have they been satisfied to do it without applause, without public reward? Have they brought to bear on this work the best they had, the best they could become? Have they never reached forth to grasp the more spectacular work of others, while turning their backs on their own? In short, have they any claim to such characteristics as, if contributed to American public life to-day, could purify and ennoble it?

I have spoken of the lack of character as the real lack in American public life to-day. Is there any question of this? To what is due the general neglect of the disagreeable part of political duty, but to a lack of character? What explains the too common custom of paying for concessions instead of fighting for one's just dues, but a lack of character? What, the yielding to blackmail, the seeking of the line of least resistance? What, the venality, the greed, and the acceptance of a double standard of honesty—political and commercial? What does all this signify, but a lack of character?

Perhaps the enlarged opportunities enjoyed by women during the past forty years have qualified them in some directions for the suffrage. Certainly, their mental qualifications will not be so sweepingly questioned as when the subject first arose for debate. But it is my firm conviction that the development of woman's character has by no means kept step with that of her

intellect. I think this is a serious arraignment of the women's colleges, one to which several of the leading colleges are awakening, and to the correction of which the best friends of woman's education are addressing themselves. There is no longer question of the capacity of woman's brain to be trained to wield the suffrage. But, alas! it can never be repeated often enough that it is not brains that are needed just now. There is a cry welling up from the surcharged hearts of those who tremble for the steadfastness of American government: but it is not a cry for brains—it is a cry for character.

“Put United Womanhood,” they say, (a resounding phrase much made use of—as if all women could be united on anything save puffed sleeves or pocketless skirts!), “Put United Womanhood into politics, and we shall have character. You will no longer see the Boss one instant the epitome of all that is evil, and the next, worthy to fold his legs under your mahogany.” But is this true? Is there even a shadow of truth in it? Have women, then, as a sex been so brave in fighting the conventional standpoint? Show me that more than a handful of women have the courage to ostracize the “great catch” that they know has no right to associate with their daughters, and I shall take heart. Give me the slightest inkling that women will fight the tyrannous hand of the Labor-Unions, now stifling the manhood of our business as well as of our laboring world. Give me the faintest hope that women will refuse to pay for what should come to them freely, that women will resist all favoritism, all unfairness! What is there in the past that can vouch for the future? Will the woman who quails before the departing cook, stand firm before the District Leader? Will the woman who submits to the tyranny of her volatile dressmaker, resist the voluble walking delegate? Will the woman who has made a mess of the domestic question, straighten out the tangles of the industrial and financial world? And, finally, will a woman who has shirked the noblest duty on God's earth, not shirk the lesser duties to which she, strangely enough, aspires? I hope I am not unduly severe. I am not more severe than are the women themselves who decry the moral weakness of the average man. In the very charge of inferiority launched against men by the women, they present the strongest possible indictment of their own sex. These men, who are so weak, so corrupt, so far below the stand-

ard of the women—had they no mothers? With so many grafters, so many “respectable” tools of a machine, is it possible that a great many women have not betrayed their trust? Do not tell me that the casting of a bit of paper in a box once a year can offset the daily influence of a mother, or that votes can be better gained from a political platform than at the home fireside.

I fail to see in women any evidence of the character that is needed in our public life. I fail to see that they are even on the right track to attain it. I think there is no school so eminently unfit for the development of character as that of the public platform, which women are seeking more and more. I think there is a grave danger to the moral force of womanhood in woman's increasing participation in organized effort, in public life. To say nothing of the wire-pulling, of the unscrupulousness in attaining an end, of the unfairness, of the love of office, of the insincerity which reveal themselves in the large organizations of women, with discouraging and startling resemblance to the methods of their weaker brethren, I hold that there is certain to come a deterioration which I like to name “Platform Virtue.” One who feeds on applause learns how easily it is gained, grows impatient of any task which does not win it, is apt to scorn such work as is not in the public eye. The most subtle moral danger lies in the fact that it is so easy to be noble, to be generous, to be unselfish, on the public platform,—in one's typewritten Confession of Faith. How is the strength to be given to work on, to fight on quietly, unknown, un interviewed, unrewarded, certainly unapplauded, when the enunciation of a few well-rounded periods yields such delightful recognition! An audience is the most good-natured, indifferent censor in the world. It seldom probes below the surface; in the rare cases in which it does, its memory is conveniently short. Just as the kindergarten methods, in the opinion of some educators, have lost for our children a certain sturdiness, a certain grim power of overcoming difficulties, so the platform habit, the club habit, the President and Secretary habit have entailed upon our women serious losses. The daily uncomplaining attention to household details that make for comfort and a restful home atmosphere; the tender, unseen care given to the children; the brooding over, watching and painstaking upbuilding of character; the brave, inspiring encouragement of the wearied wage-earner—for these things has not taste been lost?

It is so perilously easy, on the one hand, to be an angel of loving-kindness to some class of workers for whom one has founded a protecting organization, and, on the other, in the privacy of one's home, to withhold from one's servants the most ordinary human consideration. It is so easy to appeal on the platform to the highest, purest motives, to implore others to do their duty, and in the home to shrink from the most elementary duties, not only of motherhood, but of wifehood. It is so easy to be suave and delightful, gracious and charming, on the platform, and at home nervous, unstrung, impatient, fretful. The hardening processes of the age may be exemplified most strongly in the evolution of the very newest new woman. She who, twenty-five years ago, refused marriage in favor of her so-called "career," at least was willing to make a sacrifice of her emotional needs. She of to-day has no idea of renouncing marriage, but remoulds its old-fashioned idea of obligation—at times with an overriding of nature that would be comic if it were not tragic.

Are we, then, to throw over entirely our cherished idea, that woman is the morally superior sex? Well, I think the women have been banking a little too heavily upon certain claims. I think that, if they had lived for centuries in the same freedom and under the same temptations as men, they would have shown far less self-control and power of resistance; and this opinion might find support in some of the conditions known to exist in the social life of our own community. Perhaps some brave twentieth-century Fielding will arise and write an up-to-date parody of "Pamela": it will be instructive.

Even of so masculine a vice as drunkenness, there is something to be said. The assertion of sex superiority is not proven because there are fewer drunkards among women than men. Dare any one affirm that, since women have entered into industrial competition, into public life with its drain on the nervous strength, there has been less drunkenness than before? On the contrary, every one knows that the use of stimulants among women is increasing rapidly.

Notwithstanding the usual tone that pervades the speeches at a Woman's Rights Meeting (and there is a degree of bitterness, of contempt, of positive enmity against men that is not dreamed of by the average person), I believe that the work now done by the men would not be improved by being done by women.

It may seem so on the surface, but I am not wholly reactionary. I do not think that all virtue or all character is buried in the graves of our ancestresses. There is much that may be gained from all the discussion, all the unrest and change of the past half century, if only the trained women who should be the leaders will take their covetous eyes from the careers of the men, and, casting them backward over the past, will say: "Let us see how much better we can do the woman's work in the future. Let us see what training and science can do to make that work more helpful and more intelligent." I have hope for the future, because I know there are many strong women working quietly for this end. They are not the women who are supposed to represent us; they are certainly not those who periodically assure the Legislature that they do. They are seldom found on a platform. They are not presidents of clubs. They are not be-badged "chairmen" of committees; they do not belong to Mothers' Congresses, but they are accomplishing their end in a sincere, an unspectacular, the only lasting way, through the weight of personal character, the effect of personal example, through the divine influence that is so dangerously slipping away from this organization-worshipping, this number-idolizing, world of ours—I mean, the impulse of the *personal touch*. I have hope, because many of the excesses of women will be righted after women have grasped a little longer the baubles they have yearned for, after they have seen how valueless are these baubles in their hands. Then, I cannot but think, they will learn to value the things they have so blithely let go.

ANNIE NATHAN MEYER.